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Treasures in Tension: Immigrant Churches and Opportunities for Mission

Western Christians today are confronted with two highly impacting movements. One is the rapid movement of Christianity's center of gravity to the non-Western world. The largest Christian communities today can be found in Africa and Latin America, and increasingly in Asia. Philip Jenkins predicts that in 2050, only one in every five Christians will be a non-Hispanic white person. He observes that a "typical" contemporary Christian should be imagined as a "woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*" (Jenkins 2002:2). The second important movement is the large-scale migration of non-Western Christians to the West. Social, political, economic, and cultural immigrants have flocked to Western countries and have transformed the face of Western churches. These realities raise the question of their implications for a globally organized denomination like the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. In particular, we may wonder what the two movements mean for the *mission* of the SDA Church. In other words, with the abundant presence of non-Western Christian immigrants in the West,¹ what are the challenges and opportunities for the SDA mission? To answer this question, I will draw on an intensive study of immigrant churches in the Netherlands.² For this article, I will illustrate the various dynamics by particularly focusing on one specific case from the larger study: the Ghanaian SDA Church in Amsterdam. I will start with a brief introduction to this case, and then move on to an analysis of this church's four central fields of mission. My central argument will be that immigrant churches are *treasures* in terms of their potential and actual contribution to the SDA mission, but that they are *in tension* in the sense that they operate in highly challenging contexts and need to be properly supported in order to come to full bloom.

Introduction of Case Study

The first recorded conversion to Adventism in Ghana was in 1888 in the then Gold Coast (Owusu-Mensa 1993:60, 61).³ In subsequent decades, the

SDA Church in Ghana grew slowly, seeking to find roots in regions that were covered by long-established denominations such as the Methodist and Anglican Churches. Today, the SDA Church in Ghana has grown and is well-established. Out of a population of nearly 24 million residents, it has more than 1,100 local congregations and almost 350,000 members.⁴ The church runs a number of institutions, including numerous hospitals, clinics, bookstores, schools, a publishing house, and a university. The church is particularly popular in the Central-Southern Ashanti region. Interestingly, it is argued that the growth in this particular area of Ghana is related to the close connection between SDA Sabbath-keeping and the spiritual and cultural importance of Saturday in Akan traditions (Owusu-Mensa 1993).⁵ Some Ghanaians today play an important role in the worldwide SDA Church, as can be witnessed by persons such as Matthew Bediako, former secretary of the world church, and Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, an influential conservative theologian and author of a large number of books. The SDA Church in Ghana is embedded in the vast variety of religiosity in the country. There is an enormous diversity of Christian churches in the South, Muslims dominate the North, and African Traditional Religion is found throughout the country. In the South of Ghana as in wider Africa, Pentecostal/charismatic churches are highly prolific and influential in the public sphere (see for example Meyer 2002, 2008).

In the Netherlands, the number of Ghanaians residing in the country in 2010 was 20,829 (including first and second generations).⁶ This excludes the likely thousands of undocumented Ghanaians in the country. Most Ghanaians in the Netherlands are economic and social immigrants (Nima-ko 2000:121), which means that they have come for work and/or to reunite with their family. They have often lived elsewhere in Europe before coming to the Netherlands and/or migrate on to other parts of the world after their stay. The major Ghanaian community in the Netherlands is located in Amsterdam Southeast, a highly multicultural borough of Amsterdam.

Ghanaian immigrants have brought along their religious traditions. In Amsterdam Southeast, there are dozens of Ghanaian Pentecostal/charismatic churches. There is however only one Ghanaian Adventist church, which therefore is a denominational minority within the local Ghanaian community. At the same time, the Ghanaian SDA Church in Amsterdam is an ethnic minority within the Netherlands Union Conference, which has roughly 5,000 members, who are predominantly Dutch and Antillean/Aruban. The Ghanaian SDA Church in the Netherlands is therefore a double minority: a denominational minority in its local ethnic community, and an ethnic minority in its national denominational community. The church, officially established in 1999, was initiated by a group of Ghanaian Adventists who frequented a multi-ethnic SDA church. Today, the highly

active Ghanaian church has 200 adult attendees, who are mostly Ghanaian in background.

Mission I: Retrieving Church Leavers and Keeping Members

Migration is a process that easily uproots religious identities. Migration can move Catholics to Protestantism, Protestants to Islam, and Muslims to Christianity. The converting power of migration often has to do with changes in social attachments, the process of adjusting to the host society, and the local religious market. This last factor has been of special importance to Ghanaian Adventists in Europe. The transnational migration from Ghana boomed in the 1980s and 1990s. The SDA Church in Ghana is prominent, but, as noted, Pentecostal/charismatic churches are unequivocally dominant in both numbers and public presence. This was reflected in the Ghanaian settlement in the Netherlands: there were already various Ghanaian Pentecostal/charismatic churches before a Ghanaian Adventist church was initiated. In the early stages of Ghanaian immigration to the Netherlands, Ghanaian Adventists therefore faced the following choice. They could go to Dutch or Antillean/Aruban SDA churches, where they found an unknown language and an alienating worship style, or join Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, where they found a different theology, but shared ethnic and linguistic identities. Many chose the latter.

The formation of the Ghanaian Adventist Church in Amsterdam, then, was in part a response to this phenomenon of Adventists becoming *lost by migration*. Having a congregation specifically destined for Ghanaian Adventists, which combines theological and ethnic identities, has increased churchgoing numbers from a few dozens to a few hundreds. In this sense alone, immigrant churches are an enormous opportunity for mission, for they have the capacity to retrieve Adventists who would otherwise be lost by migration.

Furthermore, SDA immigrant churches are crucial to provide spiritual and social support structures for immigrants who in many ways are tempted to leave the church. For most Ghanaian immigrants, money was the prime reason that they left family (including spouses and children) and familiarity for an often harsh, lonely, and literally cold environment. Diplomas notwithstanding, they did unskilled or semi-skilled labor, and worked day and night to save money for dependent family in Ghana and provide for future retirement. This dominant economic motive often clashed with Sabbath-keeping. Saturdays were lucrative days to work, and especially undocumented Ghanaians faced the loss of a hard-to-get job if they declined labor on this day. To choose the sacrifice of Sabbath-keeping on top of the other sacrifices that life abroad involved,

the support of the Ghanaian SDA Church was vital. The church provided constant spiritual resources, such as prayer partners, attention for dilemmas in Christian practical living, and sermons that stressed that obedience to God was more important than earthly riches. Moreover, church was a haven with all kinds of socio-economic support, such as close networks (implying, for example, friends who visit one in the hospital, call when one is dealing with grief, and bring food when one is unable to cook), a welfare department that helped to pay for basic living costs such as rent and groceries, and informal financial support groups. These resources were crucial in keeping would-be leavers in the church.

Clearly, the migration context is a challenge. The change in social and religious environments, coupled with the pressure to prosper economically, make it conducive for immigrants to leave the SDA Church. The availability of SDA churches for specific immigrant groups appears to be of immense value to curtail this danger, as they strive to meet relevant spiritual, cultural-linguistic, and socio-economic needs, which, if unfulfilled, can translate into high levels of disaffiliation.

Mission II: Reaching Non-Adventist Immigrants

Many immigrant churches are engaged in evangelizing specific ethnic/linguistic groups in their host societies. The Ghanaian Adventists in Amsterdam, also self-consciously focused themselves on reaching non-Adventist Ghanaians in the urban area. Mission in the migration context, however, was not easy. Evangelism in Ghana was considered to be a lot easier than in the Netherlands. Church leaders and members listed numerous challenges. They lacked material resources—especially their own church building. In Ghana, SDA churches usually run activities on a daily basis, either in self-owned churches or schools. In the Amsterdam area, where the Ghanaians were located, church buildings were incredibly scarce and expensive. For years, the Ghanaian Adventists worshipped in a rented church, which, due to its very high cost, they could only afford to access a few times a week.

Another challenge in the migration context was legal issues. The church was not always able to get the desired speakers from Ghana to come to the Netherlands. On one occasion a guest speaker from Ghana whose picture was already printed on the flyers for a revival week, eventually could not come because he was not granted a visa. Also, changes in Dutch immigration regulations led many Ghanaian church members to flee to the UK and other countries. The inherent mobility of the Ghanaian migrant community caused not only a loss of members, but also destabilized leadership and made it hard to keep track of new converts.

Furthermore, the economic motive of migration complicated mission: leaders, members, and potential converts were all heavily caught up in surviving as economic migrants, and thus had limited time and energy to engage in evangelistic activities.

Last but not least, the Dutch maritime climate was less conducive for mission and conversion than the Ghanaian tropics: rain, snow, and cold temperatures were reported to impede evangelistic activities and keep people from attending them.

This presents a somber picture. Evangelizing Ghanaians in Ghana would seem much more effective than evangelizing Ghanaians in the Netherlands. However, given the fact that there is a Ghanaian immigrant community in the country, which is predominantly Pentecostal, the very presence of a Ghanaian SDA Church is a great opportunity for mission. Ghanaian Adventists in the Netherlands had access to Ghanaian non-Adventists in the country. Within the local Ghanaian community, they witnessed at marriage parties and funerals. They shared religious DVDs with colleagues and friends. They guided newly arrived immigrants to their church. They organized evangelistic seminars on topics relevant to the community. The church pastor had an evangelistic TV program on a local Amsterdam channel. Even the church's non-missionary activities naturally addressed other Ghanaians, because of shared cultural-linguistic identities and socio-economic needs. These various activities translated into the relatively frequent interest and baptisms of non-Adventists in the Ghanaian SDA Church. Thus, although mission work was clearly complicated by the migration context, this immigrant church had a unique ability to reach a particular people group in Dutch society.

Mission III: Evangelizing Western Societies

In recent years, a growing number of scholars and Western Christians have begun to show interest in *reverse mission*:⁷ the idea that non-Western Christians are bringing back the gospel to those Westerners who once evangelized them, but now have seemed to have forgotten that which their ancestors once preached. Reverse mission can be expressed in various modes, such as the intentional mission of (affluent) non-Western individuals or organizations in the West, the work of immigrant congregations, non-Western Christian ministers leading indigenous congregations in the West, and partnerships between Western and non-Western churches (Catto 2008:223; Freston 2010).

Some Ghanaian Adventist leaders in Amsterdam considered the importance of re-evangelizing European societies. They observed the general absence of Christianity in Dutch society, where sociologists for decades have been observing an overall decline in church attendance and

membership. The Ghanaian SDA perspective hinged mostly on their perception of Dutch morality, and less on specific beliefs or the frequency of churchgoing. When pointing out the lack of godliness in the Netherlands, they chiefly referred to issues of sexuality, such as legalized prostitution, public nudity, homosexual marriages, and cohabitation. They explained the withering of Christianity in the Netherlands by the negative influence of Dutch culture, and the alleged secularizing effect of increased welfare: more money would equal less godliness. They knew something had to be done and were willing to do it. On a humble scale, the Ghanaians did engage in reversed mission. They invited Dutch acquaintances to church, shared their religious convictions with the Dutch people whose houses they cleaned, and prayed for the Netherlands.

On the other hand, however, the Ghanaian Adventists' sense of being missionaries to the Dutch was hampered by their experience of viewing themselves as marginal, discriminated-against immigrants. As Christians in a secularized country, they felt spiritually superior, but as black, non-Dutch speaking, lower class, and undocumented immigrants, they felt socially inferior. I myself strongly experienced the reality of the social boundaries of race, language, and class in observing how the Ghanaian Adventists engaged with Dutch society and how Dutch society engaged with them. Still, I would like to propose that in spite of the very real challenge of these boundaries, the interest of immigrants to reach indigenous populations in the West is a distinctive opportunity for mission. Not only are these immigrant groups willing and large in number, interestingly I found that in the case of the Ghanaian SDA Church, Dutch secularized people were attracted to specific features of this congregation. I observed that especially body aspects of Ghanaian SDA church life such as its music, sense of community, and lively, festive atmosphere, were appealing to the Dutch. In many ways, immigrant churches do not fit stereotypical ideas about Christianity that secularized Europeans have in mind. Immigrant churches have a powerful potential because they bring something new to Western religious markets.⁸

Mission IV: Dialogue with Western Adventists

One arena that has not yet been mentioned is the SDA Church itself. An important treasure that SDA immigrant churches bring is the addition of particular forms of Adventism to Western SDA landscapes. This addition has the potential of sharpening both immigrant and indigenous Adventists in the quest for what essentially constitutes Christianity and Adventism.

In the case of the Ghanaian Adventists in the Netherlands, I observed

that both Ghanaian and Dutch Adventists took notice of the differences between their forms of being Adventists. There was some level of exchange in this regard. An outstanding example was the fact that, in a few cases, the Ghanaian Adventist pastor and his elders were requested by Dutch pastors and members to lead out in areas that, in the national church, they appeared to have an exclusive proficiency in: prayer for healing and exorcising evil spirits. On the other hand, the boundaries that separated the Ghanaian SDA Church from the wider Dutch society, also made them a rather isolated group within the national SDA church—notwithstanding attempts at integration from the church leadership. The exchange of perspectives was still largely left undone. It is important to stress here that one should not only think about the exchange of perspectives in terms of familiar issues along the conservative-liberal nexus such as dress and sexual morality, but recognize that genuinely revealing beliefs and practices can be found in the encounter. The noted Ghanaian SDA experience in prayer for healing and dealing with demon possession serves as an example. As another illustration, much can be learned from the ways in which Ghanaian Adventists, rather than becoming a SDA enclave, mingled freely and naturally among Ghanaians from other faith traditions (Catholics, Pentecostals, Muslims, etc.), without losing their specific religious identity. Also, the Ghanaian Adventists had a refreshing way of dealing with biblical sexual education in a very open, practical, and humorous way in the church. They furthermore placed a strong emphasis on fasting, which is little seen in Western SDA environments, and revealed high levels of faith in God's existence and goodness in the most adverse of circumstances. These illustrations, which are far from exhaustive, point to the missionary value that immigrant Adventists can have for indigenous Adventists, under the condition that the latter employ a "theology of receiving" (Währisch-Oblau 2006:46).⁹

Conclusions and Recommendations

In a variety of ways, SDA immigrant churches have much to contribute to SDA mission. At the same time, none of the fields in which they operate are without serious challenges. Considering the importance of mission to the SDA Church, I therefore recommend that its representatives, from the level of individual church members to local congregations to unions and higher levels, consider the unique missionary potential of immigrant churches and support them accordingly. The specifics of how the mission of immigrant churches can be sustained and encouraged must be answered by church members and leaders in specific social and religious contexts—a dialogue to which I would like to invite all who have a heart

for mission. On the basis of the above case study, I would like to propose the following recommendations as general guidelines by which to think through the particularities of different contexts.

1. Considering the value of SDA immigrant churches for the keeping and retrieving of Adventist church members from specific ethnic/linguistic groups, as well as these churches' unique ability to reach non-Adventists from these groups, it is recommended that host conferences and unions facilitate (not impose!) the organic emergence and maintenance of ethnic churches. This does not suggest total ethnic segregation, as will be seen below.

2. Considering the various difficulties that SDA immigrant churches and members face in establishing themselves and evangelizing in a foreign context, it is recommended that host conferences and unions support these churches by capitalizing on the advantages of the denominational embedding. As compared to non-SDA immigrant churches that often operate individually or in less structured pan-church networks, SDA immigrant churches are in the advantageous position of being directly linked to indigenous churches and members who have intimate knowledge of indigenous systems (educational, medical, legal, etc.) and a wide range of relevant networks. Working closely together with SDA immigrant churches, SDA indigenous churches should actively employ this unique linkage in order to both help meet the needs of SDA immigrants and to give SDA immigrant churches a distinctive factor of appeal in the services they can provide for non-SDA immigrants.

3. Considering the tendencies towards secularization in Western (and especially European) countries on the one hand and the great numbers of immigrant Christians and their willingness to contribute to a revival of faith in these countries on the other, it is recommended that immigrant and indigenous churches seriously and creatively reflect together on how forms of reversed mission can be realized. Partnerships between immigrant and indigenous Adventists will bring together the former's social, cultural, and religious features that are unique in indigenous religious markets, and the latter's knowledge of indigenous language, culture, and social infrastructure. As many studies point out, reversed mission is not easy, but prayerful and patient attempts in this direction should not be left undone.

4. Finally, considering the fact that all of us continue to have an incomplete grasp of the revelation of God, the variety of SDA immigrant churches and the assortment of ways of being Adventist they bring to the countries of immigration should be perceived and employed as a resource for mutual reflection, correction, and inspiration. Thus, the existence of

ethnic churches, for the purpose of ethnic evangelism, should not result in total ethnic segregation. Rather, immigrant and indigenous Adventists can collectively establish and monitor structures of social and theological exchange, such as, for example, exchange of preachers, intercultural Bible seminars, organized visits to congregations that represent different ethnic backgrounds, and connecting families or individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.

Clearly, immigrant churches are a gift. They have an exclusive ability to reach particular, vulnerable people groups. They are assets in countries where overall church attendance dwindles. They are resources to reflect, correct, and inspire Western expressions of Adventism. At the same time, immigrant churches face the challenges of migration-related disaffiliation and evangelistic setbacks in their ethnic groups, the social boundaries of race, class, and language in the host society, and perhaps an undeveloped theology of receiving on the part of established SDA churches. To move from being treasures in tension to come to full-bloom treasures, dedication to the SDA mission should be expressed in actively supporting immigrant churches in their challenges, and in receptively receiving their strengths.

Notes

¹In this article, I will refer to “immigrants” as those who belong to the first and second generations, which is a common delineation in studies of migration. Thus, I consider third generation immigrants and their offspring to be “indigenous.” When I speak of Dutch or Western people, I will refer to indigenous people in this sense. It must be stressed that these definitions of immigrant and indigenous people are not natural givens, but are invoked here as constructions for analytical purposes (see Appadurai 1988 for an insightful discussion of the idea of the “native” as a construction of the anthropological imagination, rooted in the fictive supposition of the boundedness of cultural units, in which “natives” are frozen).

²This study is the basis of a forthcoming PhD thesis that examines the missionary efforts of a variety of immigrant churches in the Netherlands.

³This was only one year after the first SDA conversions occurred in the Netherlands (Bruinsma 1994:20).

⁴These are 2009 numbers taken from <http://www.adventiststatistics.org>

⁵The historical importance of the Saturday for the Akan is still demonstrated by the name used for white people. Since the Europeans introduced Sunday as a day of worship, whites are called Akwasi Bronii, Akwasi being the name given to boys born on Sundays. On the other hand, the Akan name for God, as the Supreme Being, includes a reference to Kwaame, the name given to boys that are born on Saturdays (Owusu-Mensa 1993). In Ghana and wider Africa, Sabbath-keeping is practiced in many different (African-initiated) churches besides the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Bradford 1999).

⁶Statistics from <http://statline.cbs.nl>

⁷It must be stressed that this widely used term is not undisputed, because, among other reasons, it is undergirded by the normative assumption of a “stand-ard,” unidirectional path of mission that can be “reversed.”

⁸A good example of this is the popularity of a Russian Orthodox parish in Amsterdam, where a third of the regular attendees are Dutch. I attribute this unique case to the fact that it combined both some familiar social elements (e.g., the use of the Dutch language in liturgy and literature and the availability of a Dutch priest) with spiritual elements that were unfamiliar on the Dutch religious market (e.g., the sense-oriented Orthodox liturgy and its claim to authenticity).

⁹Such theologies are being developed by both the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the Dutch Roman Catholic Church in regard to immigrant Christians in the country. Drawing on scriptural notions, they reflect on the themes of migration, strangerhood, and diversity, and their implications for the ways in which immigrants are to be viewed and received (Frederiks and Pruiksma 2010).

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